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FROM THE U.S. MISSION TO THE UN AGENCIES IN ROME

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SUBJECT: 19TH SESSION OF THE FAO COMMITTEE ON
AGRICULTURE, 13-16 APRIL 2005

1. Summary. The Nineteenth Session of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Committee on Agriculture (COAG) met in Rome April 13-16, 2005. The Committee reviewed and provided recommendations on FAO's program of work in the food and agriculture sector. Members supported the main programmatic thrusts of the 2006-11 Medium Term Plan (MTP), but called for alternative budget scenarios and improved prioritization (even as they differed on what those priorities should be). The Committee discussed selected development issues: Sustainable Agricultural and Rural Development (SARD), FAO's strategy for a safe and nutritious food supply, the globalizing livestock sector, and bioenergy. Some delegations (including the U.S.) sought clarification on FAO's interpretation of "good agricultural practices" (GAP) and references to the "expected nutritional value" of food. COAG endorsed a Brazilian proposal to host in 2006 an International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (the USG was skeptical, but when the concept became unstoppable we secured modifications to the proposal that made it less problematic). The new, shorter COAG session back-to-back with the Committee on Commodity Problems (CCP) proved to be an effective format. The side events included a presentation on the USDA-supported international Internet-based portal on food safety. We objected, however, to the event's title -- "Information, Biosecurity and Ethics," and the implicit link to a vague "ethical framework," and were assured that henceforth the trade-facilitation aspect of this project would be emphasized by FAO, with extraneous references deleted. End summary.

2. The USDA delegation was headed by Adela Backiel, Director of Sustainable Development, Office of the Chief Economist, and included Richard Hughes, FAO Liaison Officer, Foreign Agricultural Service. The U.S. Mission was represented by David Hegwood (Agriculture) and Willem Brakel (State). Canada represented the North American Region on the drafting committee. The official report of COAG will be posted on the FAO web site shortly; this cable outlines issues of greatest interest to USG audiences.

Program Implementation Report (PIR) 2002-03

3. The Committee reviewed the PIR (the prime accountability document submitted to FAO governing bodies) -- or at least the sections pertaining to food and agriculture. Members welcomed the new format and its evolution to a more results-based document.

Medium Term Plan 2006-11 and the Preliminary Program of Work Proposals for 2006-11

4. COAG members expressed support for the main program thrusts of the MTP. Informed of the Secretariat's effort to apply the criteria for priority setting approved in 1999, they nevertheless stressed the need for further improvements in the prioritization of programs. Notwithstanding the foregoing, members in their interventions tended to highlight very different programs as being the most important, thereby demonstrating the difficulty of agreeing on priorities. Among the activities highlighted by delegates were: the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) and Codex Alimentarius; water management and land- and water-quality improvements; control of pests and animal diseases; funding for the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources; capacity building for WTO trade negotiations and for national agricultural statistical systems; the Food Insecurity and Vulnerability Information and Mapping System (FIVIMS); the Global Information and Early Warning System (GIEWS); work on SARD, land tenure, HIV/AIDS, gender, agricultural research, and biotechnology; and the Special Program for

Food Security. Many expressed support for further FAO work to implement the "Voluntary Guidelines on the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security."

15. A number of delegates reminded the Secretariat of

members' prior requests for inclusion of several budget scenarios, including Zero Nominal Growth, in the MTP. Members were assured that these scenarios would be presented in the Summary Program of Work and Budget for 2006-07, and would be discussed in other FAO bodies later this year. There were also requests for additional information in the MTP on extra-budgetary resources, but the Secretariat responded that such contributions are hard to predict with certainty.

Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development (SARD) and
Good Agricultural Practices (GAP)

16. On this primary agenda item for COAG, there were over 40 interventions, with all countries commending FAO's interdisciplinary work on SARD, supporting the three program thrusts that were identified to guide future direction, and encouraging continued work with the SARD Initiative, a civil-society led, FAO facilitated, action-oriented partnership.

17. Two issues in the SARD paper proved to be the most contentious of the entire COAG meeting: Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and the proposal for Brazil to host an international conference on agrarian reform in 2006. Ironically, both issues should have been stand-alone agenda items, rather than having been included in the paper on SARD, making substantive discussion on SARD difficult.

18. While most countries supported the idea of GAP, some countries, including the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and Zimbabwe, still raised concerns similar to those raised in the 2003 COAG on this issue. Although FAO had reiterated, in paragraph 27 of the SARD paper, that GAP would not create any new regulatory-type frameworks, would be consistent with existing ones (e.g., IPPC and Codex), would not create barriers to trade, and would be voluntary and non-prescriptive, there was enough ambiguity in the remaining paragraphs that made countries question these assertions and exactly what was meant by such phrases as "global GAP principles" and "required GAP protocols."

19. In the drafting committee, the COAG Report proved difficult to negotiate on these points. The final text showed an inconsistency between paragraphs 22 and 23, in which it was acknowledged that some countries called for further clarification of GAP, then declared that the Committee recommended further development of GAP. Responding to efforts led by Australia and supported by the U.S., the Secretariat agreed that this was an inconsistency and that "further clarification would be provided in a timely manner." It was understood that further work on GAP would not be done unless there was agreement on GAP from the information provided.

110. Many countries intervened only to endorse Brazil's proposal for an international conference on agrarian reform. While all agreed on the importance of issues to be taken up by such a conference, much concern was voiced about the potential expense, in both budgetary and staff support, to FAO. This concern was noted with the request for FAO to keep member countries apprised of conference budget estimates. After the report was accepted by the Committee, Brazil took the floor to say that they would cover conference expenses. The USG was skeptical of Brazil's initial call for a "world" conference and the associated costs and possible calls for new international instruments. When, however, it became clear that the proposal was unstoppable, we worked behind the scenes with the Brazilian delegation to downgrade the "world" conference to an "international" conference, and to specify that the conference would provide "a forum for discussion and exchange of information on national policies" and international cooperation.

111. The Report also took on the U.S. suggestion that the COAG meeting in 2009 (which will be the next time that the Committee will review SARD) be used as a foundation for that year's discussion on agriculture, land and rural development at the 17th session of the UN Commission on

Sustainable Development.

FAO's Strategy for a Safe and Nutritious Food Supply

112. At the seventeenth session of COAG in April 2003, members had agreed that the agenda item "FAO's Strategy Towards a Food Chain Approach for Food Safety and Quality" needed to be revised. The revision presented this year was generally supported as an improved proposed FAO strategy. The Committee endorsed the development of a strategic food chain approach and requested support for the implementation and allocation of funds from the regular budget. During interventions, the EU mentioned the need for more funding to the Codex Trust Fund. The U.S. statement reflected a concern on FAO's introduction of the concept of "expected nutritional value," particularly if Codex were to take up this concept in its standard setting. We added that, until we understand more fully what is encompassed within the concept, FAO should move very cautiously into this area.

The Globalizing Livestock Sector: Impact of Changing Markets

113. Many members agreed that the livestock sector has an important role to play in economic development and food security. They endorsed the need for an enhanced FAO capacity building program to assist developing countries plan and implement their national strategies in order to take advantage of trade opportunities. Several members also expressed concern over transboundary animal diseases. The U.S. commented that FAO had a role to play in improving small-scale livestock producers, traders and processors.

Bioenergy

114. Although not discussed at great length, the issue of bioenergy to help diversify agricultural and forestry activities and to improve food security while contributing to sustainable development was seen as important FAO work. It was agreed that a Priority Area for Inter-disciplinary Action (PAIA) would be formed on this topic.

Side Events

115. Six side events were held in conjunction with the Session: SARD and Civil Society; Water for Food and Ecosystems; Information, Biosecurity and Ethics; Bioenergy and Agriculture; the Impact of HIV/AIDS and other Diseases on Nutrition, Food Security and Rural Livelihoods; and the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD). Ten U.S. civil-society organizations (CSOs) came to Rome to participate in the SARD side event and other related CSO activities. The United States objected to FAO's introducing the USDA-funded Internet-based portal on food security as part of a vague ethical framework tied to the Millennium Development Goals. After a private meeting with the Assistant Director-General of the Economic and Social Department, we were assured that, in the future, FAO would present this web site strictly as an information portal to facilitate trade, ensure food safety, provide the latest information on standards and international regulations and protect animal and plant health.

Other Matters

116. The EU proposal to combine COAG and the Committee on Commodity Problems raised a lively discussion among members, who then requested that the Secretariat prepare an assessment on such a proposal for presentation to the joint Program and Finance Committee in September and the Council in November.

117. The Twentieth Session is scheduled to take place in Rome during April 2007.

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